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We Can Be Human Only Together*

Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu

All of us are aware of just how important statistics are. We know how important they are for planning, for knowing the extent of the problem, for providing an adequate response, and for providing an adequate remedy. We know how important it is to be hard-nosed, unsentimental, and realistic.

For all of those things, statistics are crucial. But they can also be numbing. They can also desensitize us, and make us "switch off," which is a very common defense mechanism in the face of especially devastating reality. They can, therefore, make us forget a very important fact: we are not talking about numbers. Each of those numbers represents a human being, a person, of flesh and blood, not an anonymous, faceless statistic. You hear that in my country perhaps one out of nine [people] are infected with HIV. Imagine if you [in this auditorium] represented the South African population, and we counted out, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine—you have AIDS. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine—AIDS. We are in fact speaking about the daughter of, the wife of, the sister of, the husband of, the father of, the brother of someone. Perhaps my call to you would be to put the face of one of your loved ones to represent the statistics. Maybe that would help to bring those numbers to life.

I gather there is something called donor fatigue. It is when those who can do something about some awful situation are turned off because they have had so many appeals to do something—to donate money, for example, or to help alleviate yet another calamity, yet another disaster in the same old places. The same places they were asked to help out yesterday. And they are, frankly, just pooped. They have had as much as they can take, and to survive they

* Remarks made as part of a panel discussion entitled "Advancing the Health of the World's Children," sponsored by the University of Washington, May 7, 2002.

switch off. I will not let that stop me from trying to engage your compassion, or from seeking to engage your humanity.

Children are dying—dying from preventable disease. Imagine your dearly loved baby, your infant, your child, expiring before your very eyes for lack of fairly cheap inoculations for diphtheria, smallpox, polio, and tuberculosis. Your child contracting malaria because of stagnant pools of putrid water; getting kwashiorkor because she does not have enough to eat; or even, contracting cholera because of a lack of clean water. You would be appalled. Now, in addition to all of that, there is the HIV/AIDS epidemic. And with the epidemic, drugs are often too costly to be afforded by the very poor. Mothers who have AIDS infect infants, when an antiretroviral drug could prevent mother-to-child transmissions. When you have a high infant mortality rate, families try to have big families hoping that some children will survive, and the mother is almost perpetually pregnant or nursing. She is perpetually drained and, therefore, cannot contribute to the family income. I do not have to tell you that disease causes poverty, and poverty causes disease; it is a horrendous, deadly, unholy symbiosis.

You have already heard about HIV orphans and widows. They are saying that in South Africa it could in fact happen that 50% of the working force could be wiped out. Now, our economy is not too bad, but imagine if skilled labor disappeared in one fell swoop. Imagine the impact on the economy. You are people with imagination. Think of a child, who is barely into her teens, who must look after her siblings because both of her parents have died. Such children must become adults when they should still be playing.

I appeal to your humanity, to your humanness.

There was a film long ago called *The Defiant Ones*. I do not know if you remember it. It was of two convicts escaping. They are shackled to each other. One is white, and one is black. They fall down a slippery ditch, and try to claw their way back to the top. One nearly makes it, but cannot because his mate is still down at the bottom, and so he slithers back down to the bottom. The only way they will be able to make it is together—up and out. Similarly, as you might have begun to realize after the ghastly

happenings of September the 11th, we are all bound together. A person is a person, through other persons. I am me only because you are you. I can be me only because you are fully who you are.

We are taking too long to learn a lesson that God wants to teach us: that no one, no nation can exist in isolation. That is the kind of world that God has created. The totally self-sufficient human being is sub-human. We will swim or sink together. You are not able to quarantine yourselves off from the rest of the world, because someone who has TB in India can infect you here. They cough, maybe they are working at an airport, the germs slither onto the plane, then you get on the plane, and you are infected.

God is saying there is no way in which you can win the war against terrorism as long as there are conditions that make people desperate. This is the logic of being human. It is something that we should have learned long ago, and yet do not heed, that we cannot be human on our own. We can be human only together. It is an incredible privilege that we are given by God.

Have you been to heaven? Well, you have been. Those of you who worship have been, especially worshipping in the Eucharist, when you say, "we who have been baptized have baptized into the death of Jesus Christ and have risen with this Jesus Christ." We have ascended with this Jesus Christ. Although we do not believe it sometimes, we are reigning with this Jesus Christ now, at the right hand of the Father. And at high points in our worship, we are all transported to heaven.

When you are in heaven do you notice God? Do you notice the tears in God's eyes? The tears streaming down God's face as God looks on us and sees the awful things that we, God's children, do to each other? God cries. God cries. Then do you notice the smile that breaks over God's face like sunshine through the rain, almost like a rainbow? Do you notice God smiling when God looks on you and notes how deeply concerned you are? And the smile breaks out into a guffaw because God said, "Ha ha ha, you have vindicated me. I had been asking myself, gee whiz, what ever got into me to create that lot? And then when I see you, yes you," God says, "you are beginning to wipe the tears from my eyes because you care. Because you

care, and you have come to learn that you are not your brother or sister's keeper, you are your brother's brother, and your sister's sister." And God says, "I have no one except you, thank you for vindicating me."